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Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain ***By Steve Wright, VE7CT***

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It was sheer accident that upon hearing of a proposed DXpedition to Malpelo Island in 2012, via 'The Weekly DX' publication that I decided to investigate via the Internet to see who was involved. To my surprise two of my friends' faces appeared as part of the team that originally was comprised of the Jumanji Contest



Club of Colombia, K4UEE Bob Allphin and W6IZT Gregg Marco, both previous DXpedition companions.

I immediately e-mailed Bob (with whom I had been on 4 DXpeditions in the past) to ask rather indignantly why I had not been apprised of this situation and (in a more humble manner) should the team be expanded for any reason that I be considered as a potential member of the team. 'Of course' said Bob, as if he were planning it all along.

That's where it all started and due to the very nature of Malpelo Island and the difficulties to be faced, it was decided that indeed the team be expanded (at considerably more cost, of course) so that an all out attempt be made to reduce the 'wanted status' throughout the world from #12 to 'off-the-charts' such that there would be no further requests for expeditions to the powers that be for many years to come.

Our final team had three medical doctors on board. K9SG who was to be our GP, W0GJ an orthopedic physician who only wanted to be involved if someone broke a limb as DXpeditioning is a vacation for him compared to his busy practice and K0IR who is a retired radiologist and since there were no MRI or X-ray machines on the Island had the perfect excuse to play radio only!

All three medical personnel however, were very vocal in their advice prior to the expedition as to our pre-conditioning in preparation of the harsh and steep terrain as well as warning (or was it nagging?) us to stay well hydrated during our tenure on Malpelo Island.

(Continued on page 2)

Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 1)

In October of 2011, three members of the Colombian Contest Club headed by Jorge HK1R were given the opportunity of visiting Malpelo Island courtesy of the Colombian Navy in order to determine whether it was possible to find a way to the top of one of the three peaks as well to see for themselves the facilities that had been offered to them concerning utilizing one of the two buildings used by the Navy Marine garrison. They were shown a route up to the top of the peak on which a shipping beacon was located and subsequently determined that it was indeed possible to set up a small station.

After inviting Bob Allphin K4UEE to join the Colombian team (no doubt due to Bob's reputation not only as an experienced DXpeditioner but also his capabilities as a good fund raiser) Bob decided it would be judicious to fly to Cartagena and meet with the organizers and to take along Gregg Marco W6IZT and George Nicholson N4GRN to determine the logistics that would be involved in creating a successful DXpedition. There it was decided to expand the team to twenty members. It was also decided that four of the Colombians (subsequently dubbed the Fabulous Four) would depart for Malpelo on Christmas Day to begin assembling antennas and station equipment that had already been shipped to Colombia from the US as well as to install safety lines to assist in climbing up from the shore up to the first staging area where the buildings were located (Op B). In addition, safety lines would be needed for the more dangerous areas on the way up to the mountain peak (Op A). Further attempts to install the antennas at OP A were thwarted by extremely heavy rains between Christmas and up to a week before the team was to arrive on the island. Nevertheless, the Fantastic Four made up of HK1MW Bolmar, HK1N Jim, HK1T Salim, and HK6F Faber, did a magnificent job while away from their families at a time when family is so important, to pave the way for the rest of the team to 'hit-the-ground-running' and to commence immediate operation.

The late arrivals consisted of HK1R Jorge (team leader), HK3JJH Pedro, HK1X Pedro, DJ9ZB Franz, LU9ESD Manu, PP5XX Peter, K4UEE Bob, W6IZT Gregg, N4GRN George, K0IR Ralph, W0GJ Glenn, WB9Z Jerry, N6OX Bob, K9SG

Gary, VA7DX Neil, myself VE7CT Steve and our photographer HK3ORE Gustavo and, of course, Murphy himself! No DXpedition is ever complete without Murphy who is a close friend of Robby Burns. You know. . . . 'The best laid plans of mice and men'. . . .

Our team assembled in Bogota, Colombia on the evening January 18th at the Capital Hotel. Several other HK hams came to meet us and wish us a 'Bon Voyage' over a drink or two. The following day saw us all back at the airport to take a Satena flight from Bogota to Buenaventura, a port city on the west coast of Colombia where we would board the Sea Wolf to take us to Malpelo Island. Originally it was planned that we would take ground transportation to Buenaventura but due to the possibility of potential danger due to rebels in the rural areas we decided it would be wiser to fly. When it came to check in time for the Dornier commuter type aircraft we were vastly overweight with our baggage and correspondingly arranged to have it taken by truck to Buenaventura.

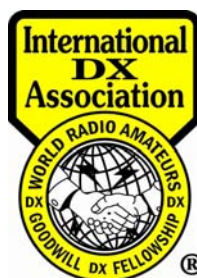
Upon arrival at the airport some 20 miles outside of Buenaventura, we were picked up in vans and cabs for a hair-raising trip at breakneck speeds along narrow roads surrounded by jungle and shacks of the poor, often bottoming out with the bumps from a heavy 'ham' load until we got into the grid locked traffic of the city itself.

Once in Buenaventura some anxious moments oc-

(Continued on page 3)

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Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 2)

curred when it was found that a 'protest' group had occupied and blocked the only bridge to the port, and we were on the wrong side of it. After killing time at a roadside bakery/restaurant we finally felt compelled to proceed to the hotel. Buenaventura, we were told, is an extremely dangerous city at night and especially in the area where we had been delayed, so we opted for the safer plan. After an hour or two we were able to continue to the coast. We checked into the beautiful Colonial type hotel expecting to leave early the next day, only to be asked to meet at the boat around midnight for a very early morning (4:00 AM) start of our 28 hour trip to arrive early morning in daylight at Malpelo a day and night later.

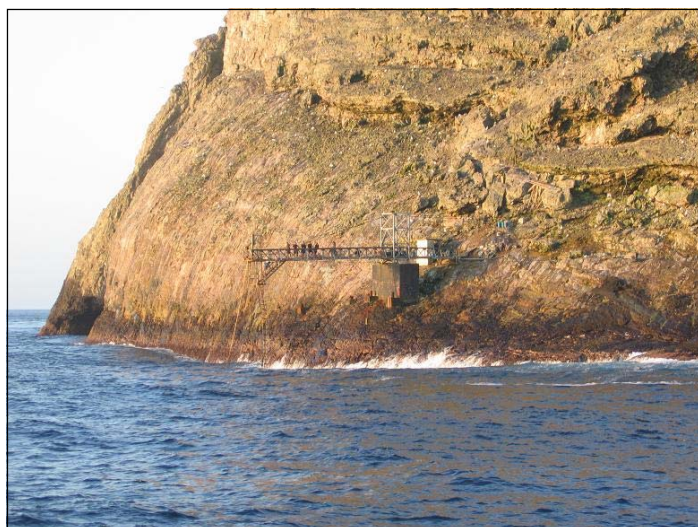


Sea Wolf, our seaworthy vessel on which we were to spend 28 hours to reach our destination.

Malpelo Island lies some 240 miles off the west coast of the host country of Colombia and is only accessible by boat. It was formed volcanically some 18 million years ago and is basically the top of a mountain that stands some 4000 meters above the sea floor with about 300 meters above sea level projecting up almost vertically from the shore. There are several sharp craggy adjuncts next to the Island that project upward to about 40 meters high. Some grasses are seen on these islets but we saw none on the main Island itself due mainly to the masses of omnivorous land crabs.

Previous DXpeditions were confined to the Island's east side close to the water level being the only landing area and most certainly never more than

100 meters upward to where now stand two small buildings on the only relatively level part of the east side of the Island. This explains why it was difficult for areas west of the mid-west USA and Asia to make contact with previous DXpeditions due to the masking by the mountain to all signals in that direction. The buildings and an original tangon (a horizontal type of fixed gantry just above sea level for access via rope ladder to shore) were built about 1986 when the Colombian Navy established a small garrison to establish and enforce their sovereignty as well as to protect fishing rights in a 20 mile radius of the Island and to connect the area to the Colombian territorial area off the coast of the mother country. A new tangon was constructed in 1999 and is the one existing today. Apparently a newer one still is planned with a hoist to lift a fast pursuit boat off the water and out of reach from the sea.



The tangon is the only way to get to a point to begin one's climb to a habitable location.

The Navy marines number about eight and are rotated on a regular basis. A Navy vessel was in the area to constantly monitor and protect it from illegal fishing. Regular visitors are diving tours from Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama but only 25 people at a time are allowed to go to the area in order to protect the marine environment. The boats on which these excursions travel must be totally self-sustaining as shore landings are not allowed except for dire emergencies. The Island and surrounding marine environment is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is administered by the Parques Nacionales

(Continued on page 4)

Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 3)

de Colombia. We were accompanied by a representative from the Parks, a young man by the name of Columbo. It was his responsibility for the protection of the flora and fauna of the Island including the marine environment and he had police powers to arrest fishing violators—of course, with the accompaniment of the Navy Marines!



A Nazca Booby gets on the “squawk box” to provide a QSO in the early going.

There are many Nazca Booby Birds that dot the Island breeding and raising their young. This particular species is found only in the Eastern Pacific and are recognized as a separate species from the Masked Booby Birds. They can be very protective especially when they are hatching eggs or when their chicks are very young as an advanced party of our team members from Colombia were to discover last October. Also we saw Magnificent Frigate birds as well as terns and a sandpiper-like bird at sea level. As previously stated, there are masses of land crabs that have voracious appetites and will eat literally anything and everything from coffee grounds to underwear and their dead buddies. They are relentless in pursuit of food. We were constantly kicking them out of the operating building and/or sleeping tents as they would show up in the strangest of places. There are three types of lizards endemic to the Island and all quite willing to share any food we had after getting used to us. There was also a brutish looking salamander-type of lizard all over the Island within the porous openings formed in the lava flows and like the lizards (or geckoes) became quite bold in our presence.



This little fellow reminded Americans of home, yet he wasn't hawking GEICO insurance.

Murphy was to strike early and we were forced to operate our six stations at OP B (the lower and main operating site) and OP A (the mountain top with the capability of four stations) without the planned WiFi networking system. Hence the logs had to be downloaded from each position on a daily basis before uploading them for analysis and submitting to Bob N200 our QSL manager for the 'Club Log' online look up. It also became apparent that our 160 meter antenna at OP A gave us some disappointing results plus the fact that we had to contend with solar flares during the second week of operation that wiped out some of the high frequencies during certain parts of the day making it difficult to continue a good run of contacts. All in all however, when the dust settled following the DXpedition and Gregg had a chance to examine the logs to merge and fill a few small holes (which he did) we were blessed with breaking a world record for tent-and-generator type of operation to the tune of more than 195,000 contacts. It did appear to us that we were being heard perhaps better than we were hearing the 'Deserving.' If this was so, I can only attribute that to the height above sea level and the steepness of the slope toward the ocean creating a lower angle of radiation for our antennas, hence a 'skip' or two less than the received signals especially on the low bands. Our results will be published on the HK0NA web site for all to view.

(Continued on page 5)

Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 4)

This record would have been absolutely impossible if it were not for the young marines and our boat crew faithfully doing the strenuous lifting, carrying of all drinking water, food, generators, fuel, operating tables and chairs, antenna equipment and everything else that was needed up the 60 to 70 degree slope from the tangon and in the hot muggy weather to supply our meals from the boat at least three times a day. They allowed us to continue operating without skipping a beat. (Had we operators been required to do everything, by the time we got set up to operate it would have been time to leave.) The pileups were indeed massive from all directions at the beginning and were still of decent size when the time came to disassemble the equipment in order to return to the mainland.



Climbing the 300 vertical feet (equivalent to a 30 story building) from the tangon to the Op B site was strenuous and certainly not danger free.

From the standpoint of degree of difficulty, Malpelo must be high on the list if not at the top from a physical aspect. Long before the expedition took place we were advised by the MD's in our group to get into shape from a cardiovascular standpoint in order to meet the expected challenge as well as to keep well hydrated while there. I am lucky in that there are some challenging hills where I live and a two month daily power walk for 45 minutes a day vastly helped me to be able to meet Malpelo on its terms. In retrospect, the climb from the tangon up the first third of the slope to OP B was the most difficult due to steepness and the larger steps needed

to get up (and down). The climb up to the mountain peak while appearing to be tough was not as difficult as we could take smaller steps and take our time. The most challenging aspect to reach OP A was a 60 foot rope climb to get on top of the mountain using what footholds on the rock face we could find and often wearing a backpack. Once on top, it was well worth the trip to see the wonderful vista on the other side of the mountain with its islets. In addition, signals all around were very strong and we only required 100 watts output from that location.



While permitting smaller steps and a more leisurely climb, scaling to Op A was still not for the faint of heart.

Due to the steepness of the climb up to OP A, several of the group chose to remain at OP B during the time we were on the island. There were problems with knees or legs, difficulty in coping and adjusting to the tropical heat and humidity or just plain not in the shape required. The major operators at Op A were HK1R, DJ9ZB, PP5XX and LU9ESD. While they would not admit it, I sense that they rather enjoyed being 'on top' and why not? There seemed to always be a nice breeze, at least when I was there, as well as a beautiful 360 degree view of marvelous sunrises and sunsets. (in fact Franz' photo from

(Continued on page 6)

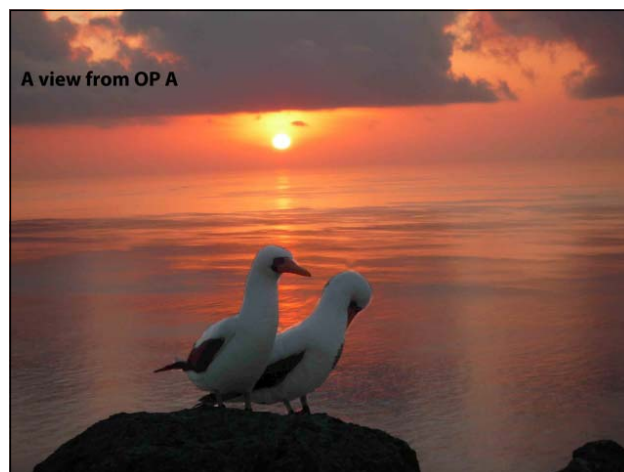
Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 5)

Malpelo came in third in the ARRL's antenna photo contest...see Sept. 2012 QST.) We admired those who stayed at OP A for their putting up with the lack of amenities while up top although they did receive their meals as did the rest of us thanks to the young marines.

A high point of the DXpedition was a tour around Malpelo Island itself in the Sea Wolf's zodiac. The caves carved out by the waves are truly spectacular and could have been traversed right through to the other side had there not been a heavy swell that would have made it dangerous at the caves' narrowest points to even consider trying it.

(Continued on page 7)



A marvelous view from Op A awaited those who were able to make the climb.



The team that brought you HK0NA. Left side, Top Down: VA7DX, W0GJ, PP5XX; second row: HK1MW, HK1N, WB9Z, K0IR; seated: HK3JJH. Right side, Top Down: DJ9ZB, K4UEE, HK1X, N4GRN, W6IZT; seated: HK1R, LU9ESD. Those missing were still serving the Deserving.

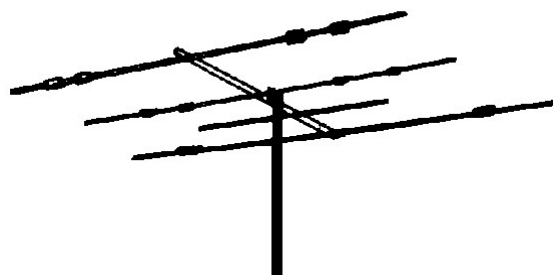
Malpelo Island—Mind Over Mountain (con'd)

(Continued from page 6)

There are many people to thank for our success: equipment sponsors, DX Foundations such as NCDXF and INDEXA—our two major money sponsors—as well as many DX clubs world-wide in the US, Europe and Japan all of whom are given exposure and credit on our web site. Also, we can't forget the hundreds of individual DXers who contributed support up front prior to the operation. Without their equipment and monetary support the operation may well have been scaled back and that would have meant fewer contacts for the Deserving. We hope they all made it into our log. It goes without saying (yet I will) the Fabulous Four really went above and beyond the call, and yet even after being on 'The Rock' for 6 weeks, they still had the cheery demeanor as if they had just arrived. I can't forget, Gregg W6IZT, who showed remarkable patience in helping to straighten out minor glitches we were all faced with from the N1MM program to the highly driven menu system of the Elecraft K3 transceiver that some had little exposure to (if at all) prior to the operation. Gregg was also dedicated along with our QSL Manager Bob Schenck N2OO, in merging and analyzing the logs to get things right, and George N4GRN deserves recognition for the time he took in uploading the logs and pictures for our web site for all to enjoy. I must also thank our pilots, San Hutson K5YY and Col McGowan MM0NDX for their 'fielding and relaying' expertise on our behalf.

Of course all this would not have been possible without the Colombian Government—especially the Colombian Navy, Ministry of Technology, Information and Communications for the license and the Parques Nacionales de Colombia whose responsibility is the care and protection of the Island and its surrounding Marine Environment which is a Mecca for diving excursions with its pristine waters and abundant sea life. As our logo we chose the hammerhead shark that school in abundance around Isla Malpelo.

--73, *Steve*, VE7CT



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